Comdt. Tommy O'Donovan

On the 1st of November 1940 Senator William Quirke stood at this graveside to give an oration commemoration the 20th anniversary of Tommy Donovan's death. Bill Quirke described Tommy as "*naturally a man of more than ordinary courage…. He was a soldier in the finest sense of the term; but he was more than that – he was a patriot and a statesman too…*"

On the same day a committee was elected to erect a memorial to Commandant O'Donovan. Nicholas Moroney from Drangan was elected chairman. It was fitting that for the 100th anniversary of Commandant O'Donovan that Nicholas Moroney's nephew, Michael Moroney gave the oration at the spot where he was killed in killenaule.

3 years later on the 1st of November 1943 Senator Quirke once again gave the oration at the unveiling of the impressive monument over Tommy's grave.

The inscription in engraved in Irish states: — *"Erected by a loving people to the memory of THOMAS O'DONOVAN, Commandant, 7th Batt., 3rd Tipperary Brigade, I.R.A. Born 19th September 1896; Killed in action at Killenaule 31st October 1920.*

Ah! too soon was he called to yield up his young life, and 'twas sorely we missed him throughout the dark strife. But we felt that his spirit was cheering us on, in the struggle for freedom round old Slievenamon."

(McDonnell, Monumental Sculptors, Templemore.)

And again on a rainy November 1st, 1953, 72 Years ago Senator Quirke stood outside the former Munster and

Leinster Bank in Killenaule to unveil the plaque at the spot where Tommy Donovan was killed.

The plaque, engraved in Irish, simply states, ***"In loving memory of Commandant, Thomas O'Donovan, 7th Battalion, 3rd Tipperary Brigade of the Irish Republican Army, who fell here in battle with the foreigners on 31st October 1920. Eternal peace to his soul."***

Senator Quirke commented on that day in 1953, that he remembered passing a remark in 1943 about the small attendance that day. In 1943 the national spirit was at a low ebb. Which is understandable, it was still only 20 years since the Civil War ended and the wounds of the Civil war still ran deep and many old comrades still had a fear and resentment of each other.

But on November 1st, 1953, something special happened in killenaule village. As the large crowd waited for proceedings to start there was an obvious absence of The Old IRA men who had fought on both sided of the Civil War.

But then the sound and sight of the Moycarkey Pipe Band brought a sight few people ever expected to witness again: A column of hardened, aging men, veterans of the War of Independence and Civil War, marching with a unified step. They were the **survivors of**

the 7th Battalion, the living echoes of the Brigade, parading together once more under a single, proud flag.

Leading the contingent was none other than the legendary Dan Breen. They were not marching for a treaty, nor against one; they were there as a united group, bound by shared blood and sacrifice. In that moment, the wounds of the Civil War seemed to heal, if only superficially, as the veterans put aside the devastating split between Free State and Anti-Treaty sides to fulfil a singular, sacred purpose: to honour their fallen Commandant, Thomas O'Donovan, and unveil the plaque in his honour. The plaque had been designed and made by Brophy Stone-cutters from Tommy's home village of Glengoole.

Bill Quirk gave many of the orations here in Glengoole and Killenaule over the years before he died in March 1955. But Bill was chosen not just because he was a Senator or because he himself played such a crucial part in the War of Independence and Civil War, but because he was a friend of Tommy's.

Their friendship goes all the way back to 1903 when a young 8-year-old boy living with his family in their public house in Drangan saw a small skinny 6-year-old boy and his younger sister walk into John and Dora Morris' house

next door. Little did young Bill Quirke think of the legacy that small boy next door would leave.

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The majority of us here are well aware of Tommy Donovan's activities during the Tan War. From his early volunteer days in 1916, the Drangan Barracks attack, The Newtown Cross Ambush, Oola, and many more. These deeds stand as a testament to his courage so I'm not going to go in any great detail about these today.

But who was Tommy Donovan?

It's well known that Tommy's father James O'Donovan was a native of Roscarbery in West Cork and was a

relation of the famous Fenian, Jeremiah O'Donovan (Rossa).

James O'Donovan made his way to Glengoole in the 1890s to become the first manager of the newly erected creamery. Here he met and fell in love with Ellen Kennedy, who he married in January 1896. The following September their first child was born: Thomas Joseph O'Donovan (or as he became known, Tommy Donovan).

In December the following year Mary Agnus was born, and in January 1900 their third child Ellen Tracey was born. Sadly 18 months later baby Ellen died of pneumonia.

Tragedy hit James and his young family again in June 1903 with the sudden death of his beloved wife Ellen, at just 34 years of age. With both Tommy and Mary Agnus, both under 6 years of age, James O'Donovan found himself in a terrible situation. But Ellen had come from a strong and loving family who immediately stepped in to help out.

The Kennedy family and James eventually decided the best thing for the young children would be to send them, for the most part, to live with their aunt Dora (Hanora) in Drangan. Dora had married John Morris in 1898, but they had no children of their own.

The O'Donovan children's move to Drangan village did not isolate them from their Glengoole roots and constant contact with James and the rest of their mother's family remained throughout their lives. Indeed, Tommy's, Kennedy connection would prove vital during the War of Independence.

Tommy's move as a young boy, to the little village of Drangan with its own unique history, would be influential on the young Tommy. And the friendships he made as a young boy in the village and local school would be instrumental. Next door to his home in Drangan as I said earlier, was one of the local Pubs run by Michael and Maggie Quirke. Their son Bill, (later to

be Senator Bill Quirke), and although a little older than Tommy they would form a strong bond.

Across the road and the same age as Tommy was Harry Bush. Up the road beside the church was Tommy O'Carroll. And the local boys school in Drangan that Tommy would attend would be full of young boys who would go on the be part of Tommy's 'band of brothers.'

Tommy according to Bill Quirke, was considered a bit wild, but with a good intellect and a man who did a lot of serious thinking.

On finishing his primary education (secondary education was only for the few) unlike his neighbour Bill Quirke who was sent to Rockwell college to further his education, Tommy's family could not afford such a luxury. But with his determination and obvious intellect Tommy won one of the two first technical scholarships awarded in South Tipperary in 1910, and under the strict supervision of the then Department of Agriculture and

Technical Instruction, he started his apprenticeship in the garage of O'Gorman Brothers in Clonmel.

Tommy's family and his education in Drangan with the influence of local heroes like Thomas Ryan (A Drangan Boy) and Michael Cusack instilled a love of history and the National Cause. And when Frank Drohan organised the Volunteers in Clonmel in 1913 Tommy was one of the first to Enroll.

The Company was represented at O'Donovan Rossa's funeral in Dublin on 1 August 1915. If Tommy was there or not, we can't be sure but it's hard to imagine Frank Drohan would have been able to keep the enthusiastic young Tommy away from his kinsman's funeral.

During Easter 1916 Frank Drohan and his Clonmel volunteers mobilised themselves ready for action. With the confusion caused by Eoin MacNeill's countermand and no clarity for Drohan he decided to send somebody to Cork City to find out what was happening. A young Tommy Donnovan declared he had relations in Cork and he would go. A motorbike was borrowed and Tommy set off with instruction on how to contact MacCurtain or McSweeney. Tommy returned that night with word that

the volunteers in Cork were not out and that they themselves were not to stir.

A few weeks later on Monday 15th May Tommy was arrested and found himself deported to Frongoch. Frongoch was for the British an internment camp in Wales, but for the volunteers it became a university of rebellion. Here they attended classes and organised a network of comrades and officers who would form the essence of the war of independence.

On his release in December Tommy threw himself back into the volunteers. And had soon set up a company in Drangan. Tommy became the first Commander of the Seventh Battalion, 3rd Tipperary Brigade.

But Tommy was more than just a military man. There was a political and hugely Nationalistic side to him. In June 1917 a Sinn Fein Club was set up in Drangan with over 70 members. The secretary: Thomas O'Donovan.

The following January, Slievenamon Gaelic League was set up with branches in Killusty, Killenaule, Ballingarry, Mullinahone and Drangan. The honorary secretary of

the Drangan Branch: Mr. Thomas O Donovan, who promised to have a most virile craobh.

When news reached Drangan in July 1917 that Dev was elected MP for East Clare Tommy and over 300 others paraded through the village carrying banners and singing “The Soldiers’ Song’. They also set off a number of rockets.

Throughout 1919 and 1920 Tommy took part in numerous republican activities and on the 29th of February 1920 he was arrested in Killusty for possession of guns, ammunition, 4 mills bombs and 4 hand grenades. He was sentenced to two years hard labour. He joined the hunger strikers in Mountjoy Jail and was released on May 10th.

The following month June 1920, along with Sean Tracy, Ernie O’Malley and other members of the 7th Battalion, he was central to the attack and capture of Drangan RIC Barracks. Shortly after the Drangan success, Tommy helped form a local ASU. Sean Treacy had known Tommy well and had stayed in John Morris’ house (Tommy’s

Home) in Drangan in 1918 on one of his many visits to Drangan. Treacy later hoped Tommy would set up and run the first Flying Column in South Tipperary but both Treacy and Tommy wouldn't live to see a Tommy Donovan Flying Column.

Tommy was with Treacy and Dan Breen in the Oola attack in the end of June. Dan Breen said that after the fight in Oola he intended taking Tommy with him to Dublin. But Tommy and Michael Burke had made a quick exit after the fight and "if Tommy had not got away from us that day in Oola", said Dan Breen, "he would not have been killed in Killenaule but would probably have been killed like his country man, Sean Treacy, in Dublin."

Tommy's career is well known and the many activities he took part in, but what was Tommy like? Over a century later it's impossible for us to know the man.

But we know he had a great intellect, According to Bill Quirke he was a bit wild and a "bit of a kid," but everyone knew him as a born soldier and leader, A

patriot and a thinker. He was determined that Drangan and Killenaule would not play second fiddle to any part of Ireland.

Ernie O'Malley said Tommy Donovan was 'eager and willing to fight / He was wild and wildness counted.'

Dan Breen had a huge respect for Tommy and said, "Tommy O'Donovan should be remembered, not as a kind of Buffalo Bill, but as a man who gave his all willingly so they could live a free citizen in a free country."

He had a love of Irish history and language.

It seems he also has an exceptional voice.

He was a romantic. His relationship with the heroic and famous Cumann na mBan member,

Dolly Bourke is well known.

On the 20th anniversary of his death on 1st Nov 1940 here in Glengoole graveyard Bill Quirke said:

“He was, naturally, a man of more than ordinary courage, but it was his intensive training and concentration on National ideals, which fitted him to join that gallant band of Tipperary men, who went down with their guns still blazing defiance in the face of a mighty Empire.”…..

“In his day, he was styled a dreamer, just as Pearse, just as Tomas McDonagh, just as Tone, Emmet, and Kickham were dreamers. They all thought alike; they all dreamt alike; they all acted alike..... We cannot say that the dream has come true; but most of the road has been definitely covered and most of the obstacles have been overcome.”

“Those of us who were his comrades have long since left youth behind, but as long as any of us are left it is our duty to keep his memory green—to tell the younger people of his deeds of bravery, to tell them of his loyalty to duty, to keep before the children the picture of the little Commandant who trod the hills and valleys of Tipperary, ever ready to face fearful odds for their sake.”

Tommys nephew Patrick Kennedy wrote in 1972: “He spent his three last nights on earth under my mother's roof in Mogarban, Moyglass…. I saw him leave for his last

encounter at three o'clock on the afternoon of Sunday, 31st October 1920. Five hours later his noble soul had passed from time to eternity in the street of Killenaule.

We can never be sure of what happened on that fateful night. There wasn't full agreement on Tommy's decision to go after Lieutenant Litchford that night in Killenaule, but Tommy was in the mood for something to happen.

To in some way to understand Tommy's mind that night, it is important to understand some recent events:

Sean Treacy was killed in a shoot-out with the military in Dublin on 14 October. Terence MacSwiney, Lord Mayor of Cork, had died on 25 October after 73 days on hunger strike. Kevin Barry was due to be executed the next day. Emotions were high in the ranks of the Volunteers. In addition, Tommy's close friend and comrade from the 7th Battalion, Mick Burke, had been arrested and badly beaten by a military party under Lieutenant Hooton, according to his family, Burke was beaten beyond recognition.

He went on hunger strike in Cork jail which lasted 90 days. He came off the strike at the request of the national leadership, but he was not expected to survive.

No doubt this was an emotional time for Tommy who Jim Maher described in his book: The Flying Column West Kilkenny, as 'impetuous'.

Even accounts of the night vary. the name of the officer in charge of the British forces stationed here in Killenaule was confused in many witness statements.

Some say Hueton, others say Litchfield/Litchford. But Litchfield, known as The Foxy Officer, had for a while been a target of the Volunteers after receiving orders from the G.H.O. for his assassination.

A month (18th Nov. 1920) later Litchfield was responsible for the killing of Pat Clancy outside Drangan Village, for which he received a silver medal for gallant conduct. It's believed he was also involved in the Knockroe Ambush on March 6th, 1921, where Martin Clancy, Patrick Hackett and Dick Flemming were killed.

It was the Foxy Officer Tommy had wanted to kill that night but ironically, it would seem that Litchford was not involved in the Killenaule event. There was a case of mistaken identity between him and Officer, Lieutenant George Hooton – sometimes mistakenly named as Heuton.

The Regimental report on the episode named Lieutenant Hooton and Sergeant Davies as the men responsible for killing of Thomas O'Donovan, whom it called *'the most daring murderer in the South of Ireland'. The RIC Chief Inspector's report described him as *'the notorious Thomas Donovan… It is hoped that the disappearance of this young ruffian from the countryside will have a salutary effect.'

In the shoot-out, Davies was wounded in the shoulder and Hooton very slightly in the hand. The two were later given prestigious awards – an MBE for the Officer and an OBE for the Sergeant. With poignant timing, the awards were presented to them one day after the truce came into effect in July 1921.

Tommy's sister Mary Agnus married James O'Donnell from Grangebeg, Fethard in 1922, she died on November 19th, 1972, and buried in Kilsheelan cemetery. Her son Pierce attended many of his uncle's commemorations.

I'm not sure what happened his father, James. His name is not among the chief mourners at Tommy's funeral. Chief mourners were stated as : his sister Mary Agnus O'Donovan, William Kennedy (uncle); Mrs. Morris (aunt); John Morris, Michael and John O'Donovan (uncles); Mrs. Kennedy, Mrs. Michael and Mrs. John O'Donovan (aunts); Ellie, Tom, John, Willie, Maggie, and Mary Kennedy, Mrs. Eily Fitzgerald, Jack and Michael, Mollie and Josie O'Donovan, John, Kathleen, Nellie, Julia and Mary McDonnell, Rev. C. O'Connor and Dr. W. O'Connor (cousins).

So today we remember and give thanks for the little Commandant who trod the hills and valleys of Tipperary, ever ready to face fearful odds for our sake."

I’ll leave you with the words that the late James Gleeson, senior, Drangan, said here in Glengoole at a commemoration in 1971, he said the late Thomas O'Donovan preached and propagated the gospel of militant nationalism in Drangan, the village and parish of his adoption, in the second decade of this century when that gospel was far from popular. The young manhood of the parish rallied to his call and many of them made the supreme sacrifice. Half a century later they were proud to honour his memory."

And over a century later we are still proud to honour his memory.

Old Erin's sons do listen,
It’s a sad tale I will tell
Of a noble-hearted hero,
who for his country fell
Tom O'Donovan was that hero's name
from the Abbey of Glengoole
He worked with all his might
and main to conquer British rule.

In 1916 he joined Sinn Fein to her
colours he proved true
To Frongoch Jail he went with pain
with all the lads he knew
Though then a lad of scarce eighteen
with courage bold and brave
To that noble heart what did it mean
if his country he could save.

When our leaders they demanded
that those prisoners should be free
Their voice also commanded unconditionally it should be
With all old England's tyranny she
was compelled to yield
Our Irishmen were at liberty again
to take the field.

Tom O'Donovan was the first of them
again to take his gun
And he formed up with these brave men
who then were on the run
He escaped the British "Peelers"
for a time we all know well.
Until he was surrounded in a house near rare Clonmel.

He found himself in Mountjoy Jail

but his courage never failed.
Or his mind to plan the hunger strike
for holy Ireland's cause
With his comrades he was loved by all,
a true son of Granuaile
He succeeded for to undermine
and break all British laws.

May God have mercy on his soul,
be his memory ever dear
His bravery sparkled in a clash,
his bold heart knew no fear.
Tipperary well can boast of men
so brave and true
Who fought and fell for Ireland and the cause of Roisin Dhu.

Composed by the late Mr. Maurice Walsh, Curraghtarsna, Moyglass, and Adjutant of Moyglass Coy, Old IRA.

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The Foxy Officer Lieutenant Edward Rowland Litchford:

Was born 1 Aug 1899,in Jamestown on St Helena Island in the South Atlantic Ocean off the coast of Africa which is British Overseas Territory, where his father served as an army officer. He later became a 2nd Lieutenant in the Lincolnshire Regiment, commissioned on September 11, 1918. During the Irish War of Independence, he was stationed in Killenaule, County Tipperary. In 1920, he received a silver medal for gallant conduct in Ireland related to the killing of Pat Clancy outside Drangan Village a month later. Litchford, He married Margaret Fryer in 1924 and was an army tank instructor in the Tank Corps during WW 2. He died in 1984 in Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk.

Margaret Litchford (née Fryer) was married to Edward Rowland Litchford, a British Army officer who served during the Irish War of Independence. Their marriage took place in 1914.

Lieutenant Hooton

Lieutenant Hooton was the officer in charge of the British forces stationed at Killenaule (Co. Tipperary) in late October 1920. On 31 October 1920 he and a sergeant (named Davies) were implicated in the shooting and death of Tommy (T(h)os/Donovan / O'Donovan) during events connected to an attempted IRA action at Killenaule.

A regimental report named Lieutenant Hooton and Sergeant Davies as the men responsible for the killing. Local testimony in the Tipperary Historical Journal article describes a mistaken identity element (the officer sometimes being named as "Heuton") and gives an eyewitness-style account of the events.

The same article reports that in the subsequent shoot-out Davies was wounded in the shoulder and Hooton slightly wounded in the hand, and that the two men later received honours — the paper states an MBE for the officer and an OBE for the sergeant, presented after the truce (July 1921).